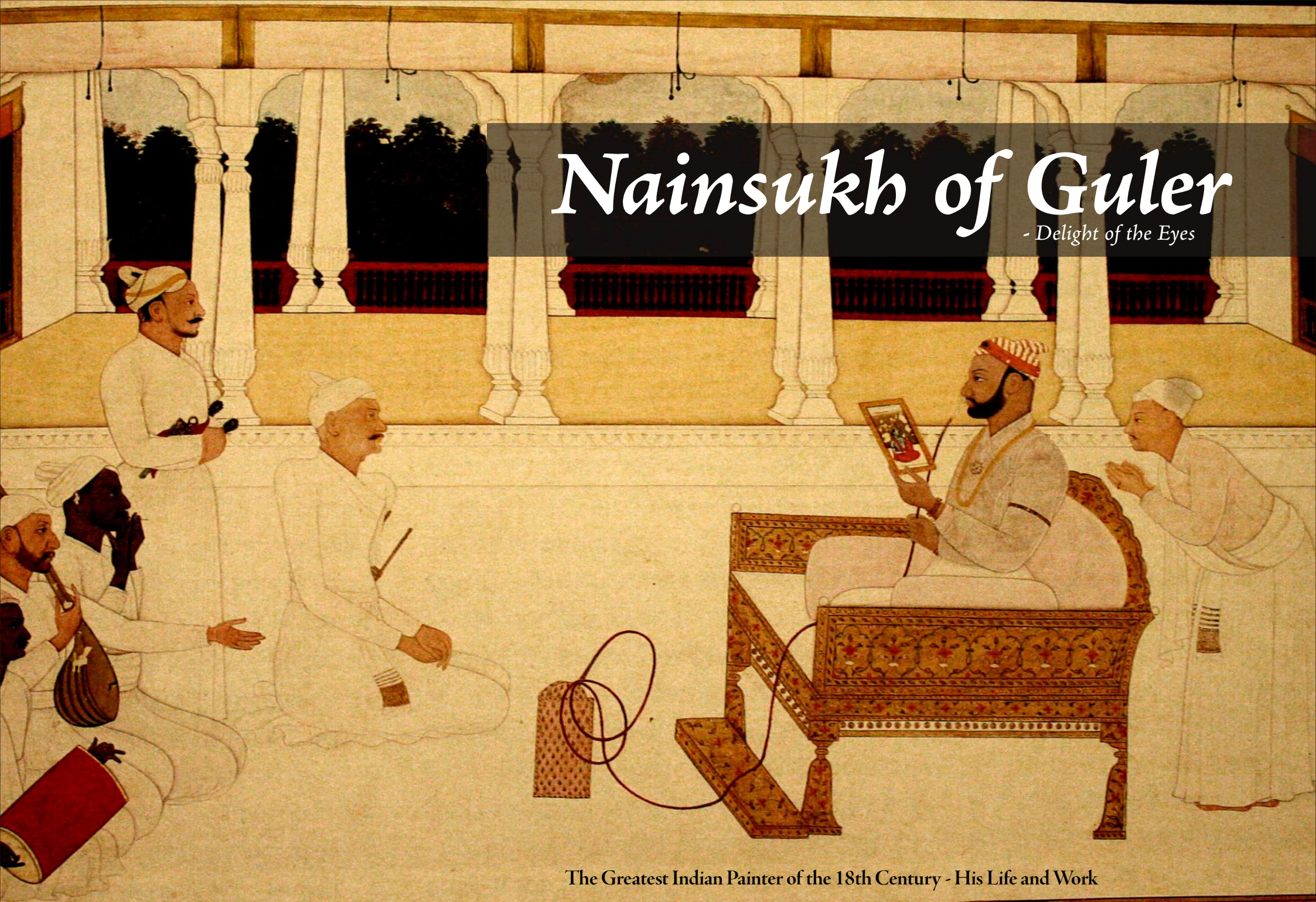


Nainsukh of Guler

- Delight of the Eyes



The Greatest Indian Painter of the 18th Century - His Life and Work



Nainsukh of Guler

- Delight of the Eyes

A biographical film for the exhibition "Masters of Their Times"
at the Museum Rietberg Zurich, September 2010 with a
dedication to Prof. B.N Goswamy.

Introduction:

Nainsukh, the painter of Guler in Kangra District (H.P.) was the younger son of the Pahari master Pandit Seu, his older brother being the painter Manaku. Patronized by Balwant Singh of Jasrota, we have amazingly lots of information on Nainsukh's life in the light of the norm of indifference towards the individual artist of the Indian traditions.

But more than the information, for the very first time, the work of an Indian painter as an individual, has spoken through the dusty years for itself. Generally in India, despite a great vividness of expression and sophistication of aesthetics, even the most glorious works of paintings from those feudal times proclaim strongly their commissioned nature; the voice of the artist as an individual, can be perceived only as a whisper.

Then suddenly we come across a across a large group of paintings, standing out for their exemplary subtleness and understatement, where extremely sophisticated observation has been condensed into agile lines of amazing clarity, firm lines that flow with natural grace, thus transcending the very condition of being commissioned.

For the first time, we see an Indian artist throwing himself into his work, and speaking through it with the most unassuming engagement with his themes, subjects and self. We can trace the life-journey of Nainsukh through his oeuvre, unfolding in his paintings, both inner and outer.

Nainsukh's works are like leaves from an autobiography. His work tells us of his early flair for his magically simple line, which brought his subjects alive, distancing him from his family tradition, his modest abandon of norms in the earnest pursuit of finding his own style, the inspiration from his father for bold experimentation, his journey towards the ideal connoisseur, of the heart-warming bond with a true rasika, the flamboyant patron Balwant Singh, and even the downfall and demise of his master and the subsequent turn his life and spirit took.

While the external details might accommodate speculation, the journey of Nainsukh as an artist is transparently expressed in his paintings. Every detail he captures and records, every mistake in his pictures he frankly white-marks, and they thus become clear statements about his self. Finally, through Nainsukh's



lifelong quest a new style is created from strong identification with the self, well within the confines of his family workshop's tradition. The discovery of Nainsukh as one of India's most interesting painters was due to the research of William G. Archer and then by Prof. B. N. Goswamy. His monograph "Nainsukh of Guler, A great

Indian painter from a small hill-state" is an monumental work for Indian art history. And documenting Nainsukh's biography in film demands an extraordinary artistic responsibility. The task of translating the nuances and aesthetics of the medium of miniature painting into that of the medium of film cannot be done simplistically or minimally.

So the essence and aesthetics of Nainsukh's work will be reinterpreted through this highly fictionalized film. The film will take the liberty of improvising on narrative details that will try to transcend the events themselves unfolding in time in favor for evocative moments and instances of joy, sorrow or humor that communicate through the paintings.

Formally and stylistically, the essence of selected miniatures will be constructed through various devices of shooting, editing and sounds to be faithful to the mise en scene, without being explicit.

Most importantly, the essence of Nainsukh's pictures comes across as an intimate human experience. That experience is what the film will aim to construct through craft and content, not just as a document but as an artistic tribute.

Nainsukh of Guler

Characters



Pandit Seu, c.1680, Master of a painting workshop in Guler, about 55 years old.



Manaku, c.1700, successful painter, conservative, eldest son of Seu, about 30 years old.



Nainsukh, c.1710, younger son of Seu, painter, first appearing as a young man aged about 20, and then at the age of 50.

Workshop apprentices and associated painters.

A woman of the household with a small boy.

A Mian, the dancing girl Zafar, a *mirasi* and a *naqqal*, two female katak dancers.



Raja Zorawar Singh of Jasrota, elderly nobleman, 60 years old.



Balwant Singh of Jasrota, c.1724, aristocrat, first appearing at the age of 18, then at 45.



Pandit Hari Saran, Balwant Singh's family priest.

Pahari aristocrats and courtiers, groom, pandits, boy kathak performer, female vocalist, musicians, old singer with lute or *tampura*, royal lady, two Persian traders, two barbers, an acolyte, old groom with a white beard, three page boys.

Screenplay by
Amit Dutta and Ayswarya Sankaranarayanan

Script and Art History Consultants
Eberhard Fischer
Suresh Chabria

Likhatam Nainsukh

It is early morning, by the banks of the *Ganga*. The birds are stirring up to the rising sun and their chirps fill the air. The panda is a swabby black visage standing against the glaring yellow morning sun. The long sunbeams bleed from the contours of his outline. The river is shimmering to his left. He asks in a dreamy husky voice, “But, there must be some purpose behind your visit...”, slowly bending down. The molten yellow sun leaks out of his head and spills blindingly onto the frame.

Likhatam Nainsukh

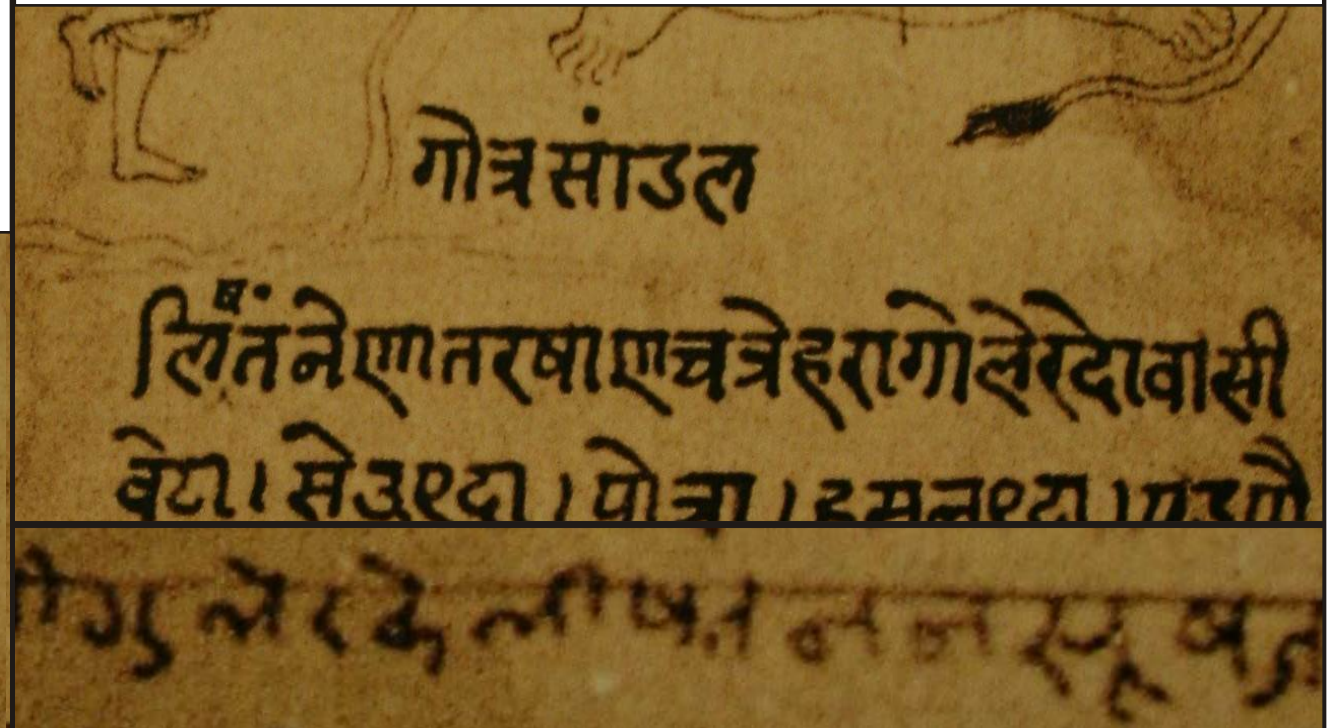
Nainsukh's neck cranes up as if in a trance, his eyelids lifting dreamily upward, in sync with the rising musical notes, which seep in imperceptibly in the air. The yellow of the morning sun plays on his face, suddenly lifting off the cloudy shadow on his face and lighting it up.



Likhatam Nainsukh

The morning light plays on the *bahi*, as a reed pen gently strokes the surface, where Bhagiratha's *tapasya* is half-drawn. The reed pen flows with the Ganges descending from Siva's locks, in a single sweeping flow, as the eye follows it down the *bahi*. The gushing of the Ganga rises as the pen descends down the page, accompanying the chanting of the family lineage in a male voice: "*gotra sandal...*(inscription on the *bahi*)."

The voice chants on and the birds chirp on and river gushes on, the eye follows down the *bahi* inscription, till the name '*Likhatam Nainsukh*' is reached. The title appears. [c. 1730, Guler near Kangra Fort, at the foothills of the western Himalaya (in today's Himachal Pradesh)]



Likhatam Nainsukh



A veiled woman, squatting on the mud floor of a small sooty room, blows into the *chulha*, coughing against the billowing smoke. The boy standing nearby sneezes.

She fishes out burning red coal nuggets from the stove with tongs and drops them onto the top funnel of a *hukkah*.

She lifts it up with the edge of her sari and the boy takes it with a cloth and hurries out through a door curtained with a chick.

He enters a cozy miniature workshop hall, and passes three-four men working on miniatures, painting, polishing, mixing pigments etc. He tiptoes fast towards an elderly figure, sitting by the corner window, sets down the funnel onto the *hukkah* standing nearby, and walks out dusting his hands.

Likhatam Nainsukh



Pandit Seu, a heavily set man past his middle age, is examining paintings intently. He picks up the *hukkah* tube and inhales deeply, looking worriedly out of the window. The thin evening sunbeam pierces through the billows of smoke from his mouth and nostrils, glowing through the long, thin evening shadows.

The smoke and sounds of the bubbling *hukkah* slowly travel through the room to the other end, where young Nainsukh, bent intently on a portrait, is framed by the arched window.

He looks up, casts one swift glance at Pandit Seu. Then he adds the final stroke to his portrait he had been making.

Pandit Seu gets up heavily and leans his arm against the window pane, looking out. He asks, "Hasn't Manaku come yet?"

Meanwhile, an elderly man seated behind Nainsukh slowly starts telling a fable, while polishing a painting, *"...the painter was not supposed to see the Rani in real life. So, keeping in mind all the traditional descriptions of feminine beauty, filling in the features like eyes of a doe, eyebrows like a bow, and lips like the bimba fruit, he made an idealized padmini type portrait..."*

The house stands bathed in draining evening light, as Pandit Seu can be seen standing, a small figure, by the middle window, Nainsukh seated at the next window.

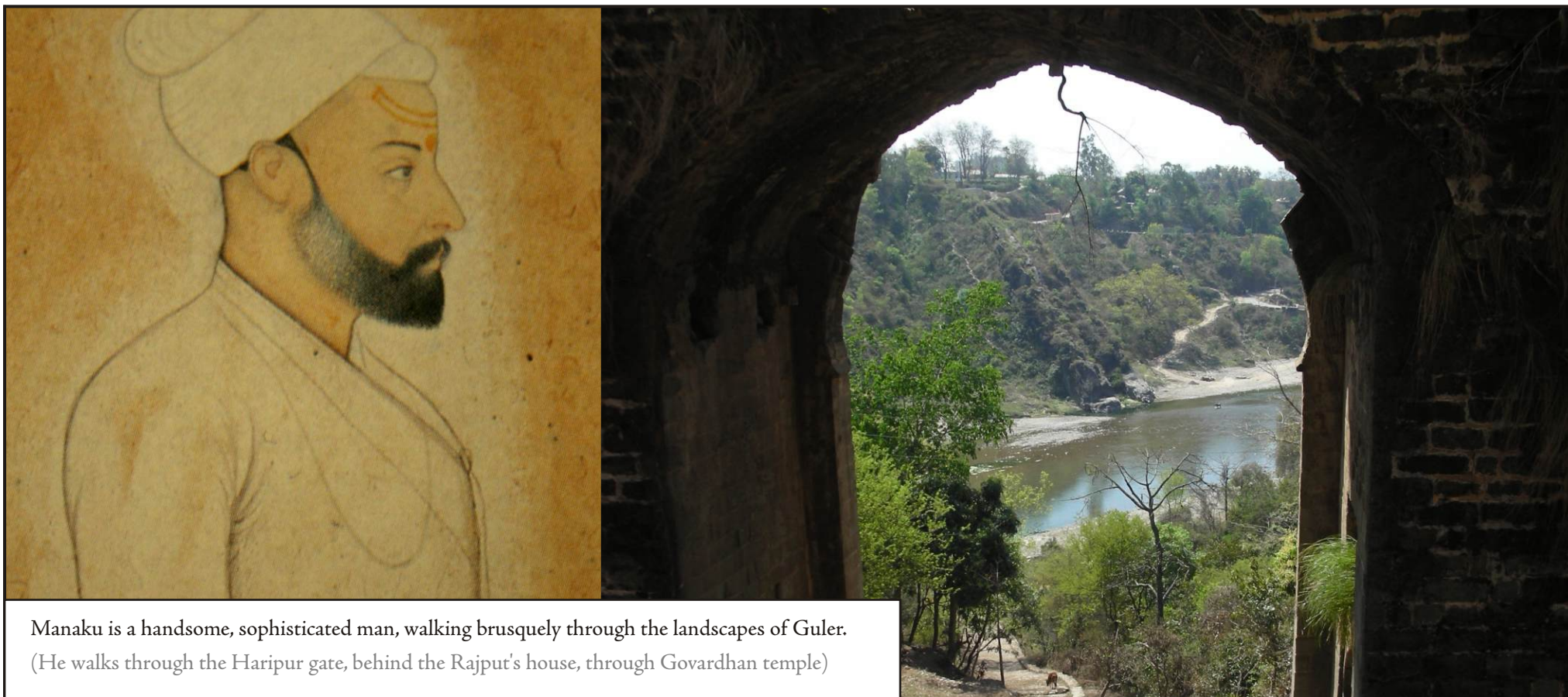
Likhatam Nainsukh



The village lies below the balcony. Manaku is a tiny white dot moving across the landscape. (Shot from Kangra fort, overlooking the village)

Meanwhile the story continues in the cracked voice,

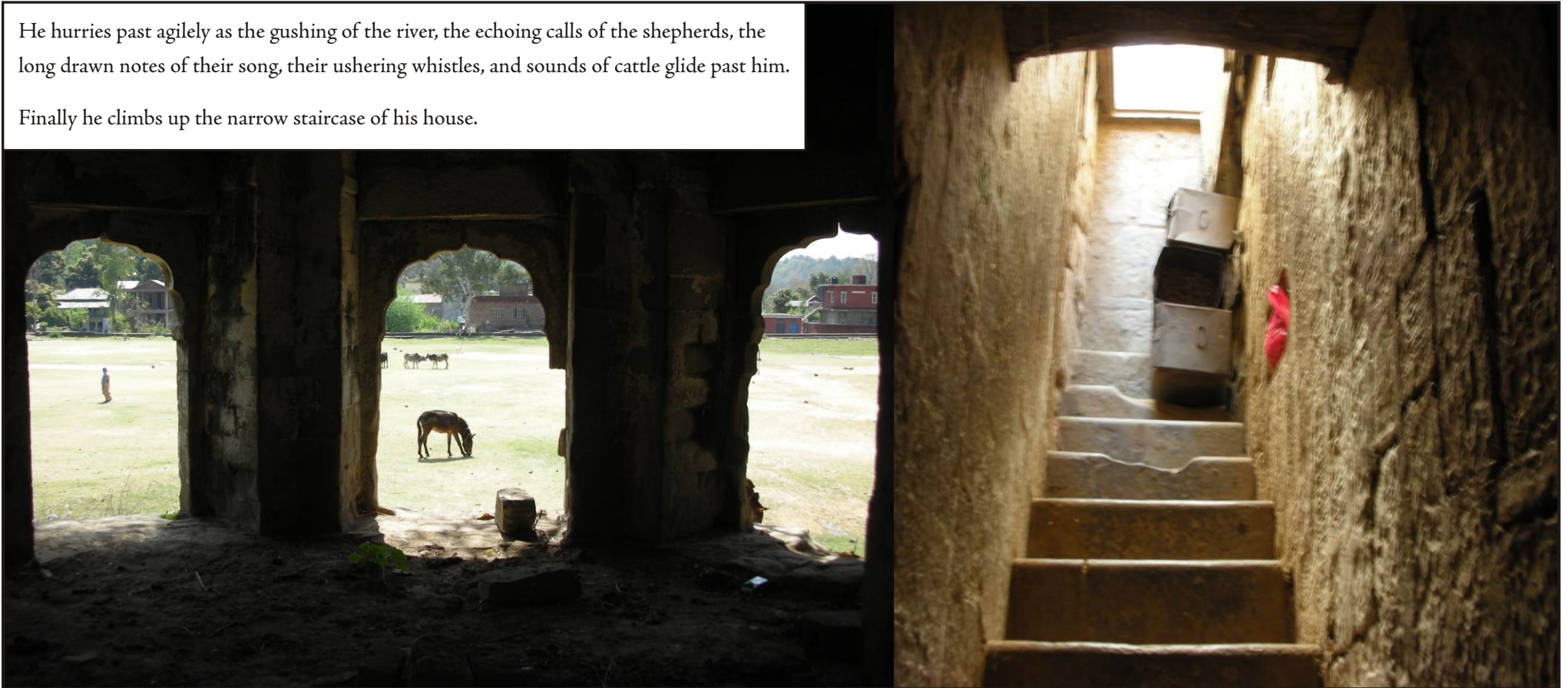
” But as he lifted the brush off the paper, a small dot fell from its tip onto the body of the Rani. The painter delivered the picture to the raja, who was well-pleased with the portrait. But when he saw the dot on the Rani's thigh, where she had a real mole, he got incensed and put the painter in prison. But the following night, the painters' family goddess appeared in the Raja's dream and told him that it was she, sitting on his brush tip, who made the dot fall on her body, so that the work would acquire a certain immediacy...”



Manaku is a handsome, sophisticated man, walking brusquely through the landscapes of Guler.
(He walks through the Haripur gate, behind the Rajput's house, through Govardhan temple)

He hurries past agilely as the gushing of the river, the echoing calls of the shepherds, the long drawn notes of their song, their ushering whistles, and sounds of cattle glide past him.

Finally he climbs up the narrow staircase of his house.



The workshop door bursts open with a sharp creak and Manaku thrusts himself in.

Pandit Seu looks up sharply towards the door.

Nainsukh looks up sharply from his work, keeps aside his board and brush and rises eagerly towards Manaku.

But Manaku, ignoring him hurries past him towards Pandit Seu, touches his feet and presents him a golden bracelet with a big smile.

Till then, the old man had come to the fag end of his story. Casting a sidelong glance at Manaku who was ignoring his brother, the old man adds the final comment,

"...thus the king, no...no... the patroness rewarded the painter. And I shall take my leave..."

He giggles a little and gathers his belongings, takes his walking stick and touches the hand of Nainsukh, blesses him and slowly moves out through the door. Manaku closes the door after him, and it becomes dark.

A moth hovers around the long flickering flame of a lamp.

Father and two sons are seated around the lamp, its flickering yellow highlighting their contours thickly over their shoulders, against the oily dark surrounding them. The stillness of the evening is accentuated by the drone of the moth and the rustle of papers that they exchange and examine among themselves, and murmurs and breaths.

Manaku's face, highlights dabbed in shimmering yellow, frowns. He says, *"But why do you, father and younger brother Nainsukh, have to make it so realistic? Let the Mughal court painters have their own style..."*

Pandit Seu, dabbed in yellow light says, *"Let him do his thing in his own style."*

Nainsukh's face shows a subdued smile through the shadows.

Manaku cranes his neck towards Seu, asks worriedly, *"What about our family style?"*

The Ramayana paintings of Pandit Seu shimmer in the lamp light, as Seu's voice says: *"Talking about styles, what do you think of my monkeys made for the Ramayana series? You can both copy them and practice."*

Nainsukh's eyes alone lift up with curiosity to the direction of the paintings.

Manaku cranes his neck to look behind, as his father had risen till then and walked towards the *janana*, and implores irritated,
“But, father...?”

Pandit Seu is about to open the chick curtain at the *janana* door. He halts midway, holding the curtain in his hand, says,
“But our goddess wants us to paint with immediacy.”

And walks inside, treading heavy steps, a blurry figure, blocking the specks of yellow shimmering from deep inside.

Time lapses as the sunrays slowly extend over the landscape of *Guler*. The chirping of birds fades in with the brightening sunlight of the early morning. (Gate at Haripur).



The workshop is fresh and busy as people are seated in their regular places, painting, polishing, mixing pigments etc. Pandit Seu is near his window, exhaling smoke onto the morning sunbeam streaming in. Nainsukh is steering a mirror in his palm, trying to catch his resemblance on paper, the mirror in turn glaring him with its light.





The old man beside Nainsukh, meanwhile, is telling another fable, while polishing a painting, *“...the Raja commended the swadhinapatika painting with words of praise and a handsome reward. But the disappointed painter turned down the reward and departed with his painting. Roaming the streets crestfallen, he came across a goldsmith, who after seeing his painting, fell prostrate on his feet, exclaiming, “What an invention! Only you could place the rose in the lover's hand to massage his beloved's feet with the most tender care!” overjoyed, the painter gifted his painting to the deserving goldsmith, who proved to be a better rasik than the king..”*

...

Likhatam Nainsukh

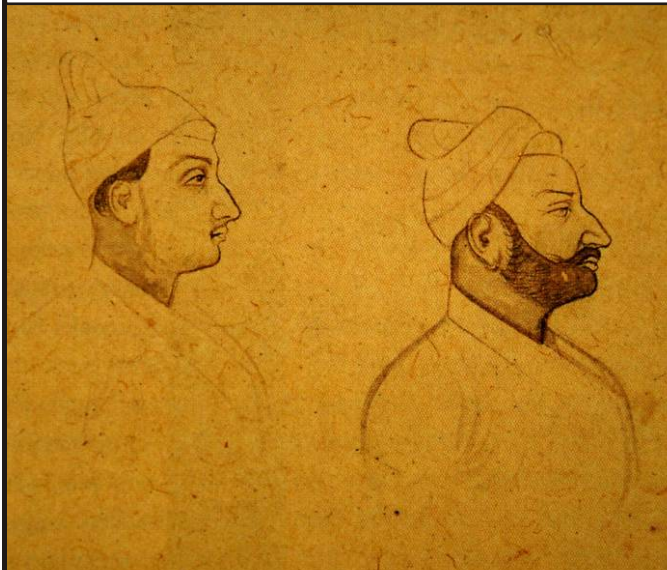
As the story is being narrated, Nainsukh is wandering in Guler through its dainty *havelis* and unassumingly beautiful landscapes of shrubby stunted greenery scattered on the undulating ground, covered with grass and lakes with jagged edges, dotted with water birds. His sensitive eyes are soaking in every detail. (Play of pahari landscapes from his paintings resembling real landscapes)

As the story ends, and Nainsukh halts on his way, his gaze fixed at a distance, footsteps of horses trotting can be heard approaching from a distance.

Mian Zorawar Singh, a personage past his middle age, exhuming an aura of heavy dignity, clad in fine clothes, followed by Balwant Singh, green of years, imitating the older aristocrat, looking stiff, trot into the lane.

The hoofs of their horses scatter a group of ducks off their path in a feathery explosion.

Their bobbing heads freeze into a double-portrait (plate 21). The gallop of the horse can be heard as the trot comes to a halt.



The painting is held by Zorawar, still astride his horse.

He smiles approvingly, the sun glaring beside him, and looks up.

He is looking up at a balcony, from the lane below.

He is looking at Nainsukh, standing at the balcony, a small figure.

Nainsukh looks on at the tiny figures of Zorawar and Balwant on their horses from his balcony. They trot away as Nainsukh turns his head after them. They gallop off kicking billows of dust behind them, dissolving with his onlooking face.

Likhatam Nainsukh



Waves of incense smoke rise up in front of the Devi diagram. The numerous hands of the one-legged haggard Devi, burst out in all directions, pointing to various names of patrons and princely states that patronize the *pahari* masters belonging to the Seu family. Pandit Seu's heavy hand adds the site name 'Jasrota' to the chart and circles it.

Pandit seu's facial profile, silhouetted against the Devi diagram, through the screen of smoke, is animated in a devotional discourse on the diagram itself. His eyes alone sparkle, reflecting the flame of the lamp, which draws an imperceptibly thin outline along his profile. He says,

"It is the Devi who sits on the tip of our brush and it is she who is holding the patron in her whim, employing you. It is for her and only with her help that you paint. She will always lend her hand to your mind as long as you yearn to grow. Our devi is the tree that feeds (nourishes) our family."

Manaku's and Nainsuk's facial profiles, each highlighted by a thin yellow flickering outline, are intent with pious concentration, nodding at intervals, cascading over each other.

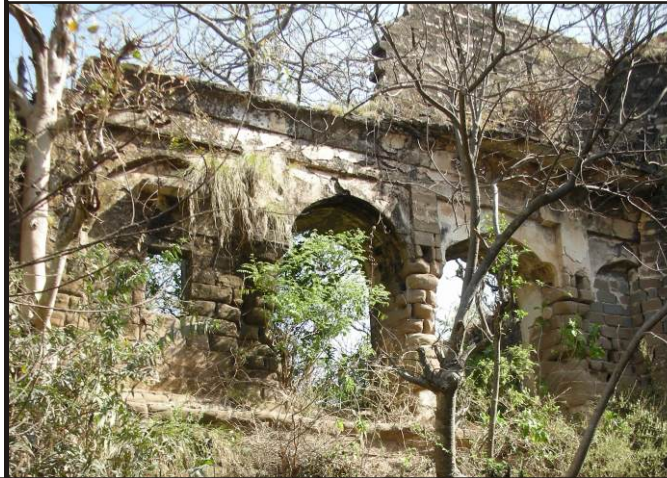
Nainsukh touches the feet of his father, Manaku and mother; they bless him by placing their hand on his head.

Then he picks up his bundle and walks out of the door holding the bundle under his arm.

He walks down the narrow staircase.

From inside the workshop, Nainsukh can be seen walking away across the windows with a mule by his side.

Various instances of Nainsukh passing various landmarks on his way to Jasrota, through Nurpur, glide by. He passes through landscapes as well as present day ruins of structures from his days. (space behind Rajput's house in Guler, Govardhan temple, Haripur palace, Guler gate, from Kangra fort, facing the village, Nurpur sunset point, the road in front of landscape, maybe some shot of Nurpur Thakurdwara, in front of Jasrota ruins)



Likhatam Nainsukh

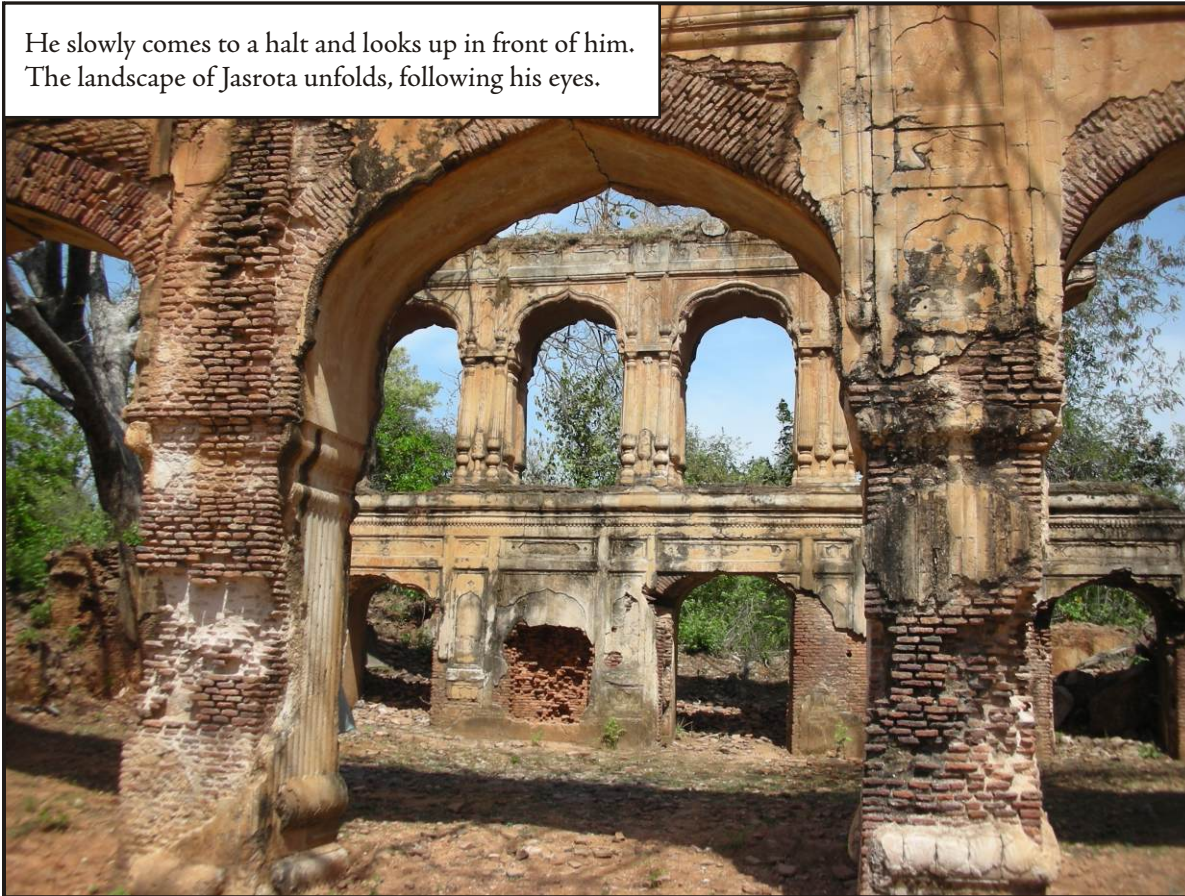


Likhatam Nainsukh

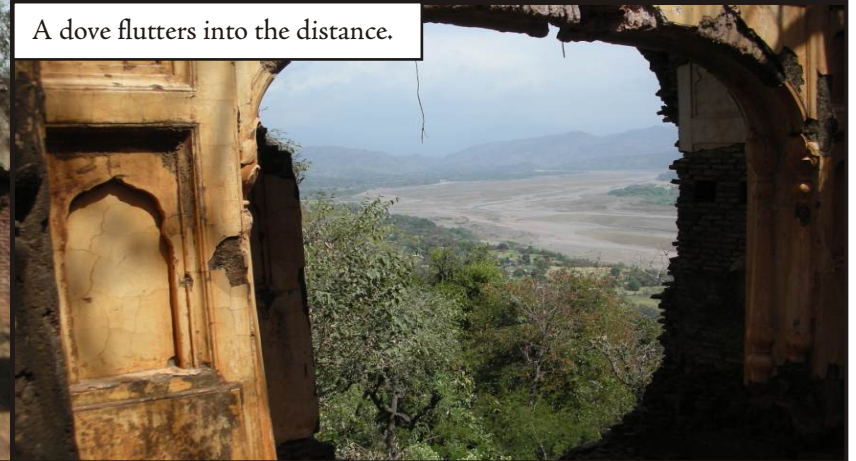


Likhatam Nainsukh

He slowly comes to a halt and looks up in front of him.
The landscape of Jasrota unfolds, following his eyes.



A dove flutters into the distance.



Inter-title:

Prof. B. N. Goswamy: *“And now begins the most interesting phase in Nainsuk's journey, which will lead him to a legendary bond with his patron at Jasrota.”*